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DE RUEHLB #0250/01 0461438

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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7436

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0878

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000250

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/15/2027

TAGS: PREL PTER MASS PGOV LE SY

SUBJECT: MINDEF MURR ON BUS BOMBING, HIZBALLAH WEAPONS,
FRENCH ASSISTANCE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (S) In a 2/14 meeting with the Ambassador and visiting NEA/ELA office director Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr stated that the 2/13 double commuter bus bombing was a sinister message aimed at him. The buses originated in his home village, and the bombs were a response to his orders to the LAF to keep seized Hizballah weapons as well as his anti-Hizballah remarks during a television interview. He suspected notorious thug-and-MP Asad Hardan's SSNP as (once again) providing the perpetrators. He strongly denied rumors that the LAF has quietly passed the weapons seized last week back to Hizballah. The LAF has maintained control of these, he insisted. As for the purpose of the weapons, Murr speculated that Hizballah is trying to protect its stronghold in the Beirut southern suburbs from feared Israeli commando raids to free the Israeli soldiers kidnapped on 7/12. Murr used the lack of Israeli attacks on arms shipments across the Lebanese-Syrian border to justify his (unwarranted) confidence that the arms smuggling has ceased. Commenting on his official trip to France (cut short because of the bus bombings), Murr expressed satisfaction that France had agreed to donate a communications system to the LAF. (Mindful of Murr's tendency to exaggerate and embellish, we will look into the details of what, exactly, the French have offered and would be grateful for any information from Embassy Paris.) End summary.

MURR SEES BUS BOMBINGS

AS MESSAGE AIMED AT HIM

¶12. (S) Murr said that it was no coincidence that the two buses bombed on 2/13 were on regular, well-established commuter routes that originated in his home village of Bteghrin, a town of 23,000 dominated by the Murr family political machine. Of all the buses in Lebanon to pick, the bombers chose vans most likely to be filled with Murr supporters and associates. The bombs were partly in response to Murr's anti-Hizballah and anti-Syria statements on his LBC interview with Marcel Ghanem on 2/8, and partly in response to Murr's firmness in seeing that the LAF maintains control of the Hizballah weapons seized on 2/7. Murr said that he himself, usually cloistered in his house and enveloped by protection during the rare times he moves about, has become too hard a target. Now he has to wonder whether innocent

blood will be shed each time he makes a statement or takes a decision Hizballah doesn't like.

¶ 13. (S) As for the method, Murr said that, based on what he knew so far, two suspects had boarded the buses and disembarked prior to the explosions, presumably leaving behind the bombs. Because the vans were full of people who took the same routes everyday and all lived in the same town, the survivors were able to describe the strangers in some detail to police investigators who have completed sketches. Murr said that the casualties would have been much more severe had the riders in the second bus (which was more severely damaged) remained on board. But after the first bus exploded, those on the second bus ran off before the explosion. Murr said that preliminary information suggested that the bombs were on timers.

MURR'S HUNCH IS THAT ASAD HARDAN
AND SSNP BEHIND BOMBINGS

¶ 14. (S) Murr thought that the perpetrators were probably "nationalists" ("qomee'een") from Asad Hardan's Syrian Socialist National Party. The suspects who asked to depart the bus at certain points did not seem to speak with either Syrian or Palestinian accents. They were able to vanish immediately into the Metn region, suggesting some local knowledge (which Hizballah would not have). SSNP, with some strongholds in the Metn area, harbors known killers and is suspected in a number of crimes; SSNP weapons depots were discovered recently in the Koura area. The Ambassador noted that Murr's father, political boss Michel, had immediately accused Palestinians from 'Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp, just as Michel had done after the 7/12/05 terrorist bomb against

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Elias. Murr said that, when he asked his father about his finger-pointing at the Palestinian camps, Michel responded that he didn't want to compound Elias' problems with the Syrians and Hizballah, so he found a scapegoat. (We note that the SSNP's Asad Hardan is one of the figures the Embassy has suggested Washington consider for individual designation.)

SEIZED HIZBALLAH WEAPONS
REMAIN UNDER LAF CONTROL

¶ 15. (S) Referring to the LAF/Lebanese customs 2/7 seizure of weapons claimed by Hizballah, the Ambassador asked Murr about rumors that the LAF had quietly handed the weapons to Hizballah after the immediate furor died down. Murr (who himself had publicly said that he would consider the weapons a "gift for the army" and would ship the weapons to the south) vigorously denied the rumor. The weapons remain under lock and key in underground parking lots converted to storage below MOD headquarters in Yarze, he said. The same location contains the other rockets seized from Hizballah by the LAF since the passage of UNSCR 1701. Murr argued that, once anything passes into the inventory of the LAF, the control systems are extremely tight. (Note: In doing our own inventories of U.S. equipment passed to the LAF, we have found that to be the case. But we were not trying to account for weapons claimed by Hizballah. End note.) He also noted that every unit in the LAF is multiconfessional, meaning that a Shia officer could not quietly pass something to Hizballah without the acquiescence of his Sunni, Christian, and Druse colleagues, which is not possible.

HIZBALLAH SHIPPING WEAPONS
TO PROTECT AGAINST ISRAELI RAIDS

¶ 16. (S) The Ambassador asked about the rumors that the weapons, while coming from Hizballah depots, were actually being trucked to Amal fighters to equip them for street

battles. Murr rejected the rumors. While not providing proof for his assertion, he said that the weapons were being shipped to Hizballah's stronghold in Beirut's southern suburbs as protection. Hizballah wants to protect the southern suburbs against anticipated Israeli commando raids to free the Israeli soldiers captured on 7/12/05. The Ambassador asked whether Murr knew where the captives were held. Because Hizballah is so scared of a raid on the suburbs, Murr concluded that "it is logical" that the two Israelis must be there.

¶ 7. (S) The Ambassador noted that the seizure of the weapons-laden truck occurred because of a series of serendipitous events. Now that the one truck proved beyond any doubt that weapons are being shipped around the country, what systems are being put in place? Murr boasted that he was working on a plan with the LAF to clear inspection areas along major thoroughfares to check trucks more systematically. He hoped to start implementing this soon.
(Note: We're skeptical. End note.)

MURR SEES LACK OF ISRAELI ATTACKS
AS EVIDENCE NO ARMS SMUGGLING OCCURS

¶ 8. (S) The Ambassador noted that Lebanon still has a serious problem of weapons smuggling across the Lebanese-Syrian border and that some way needed to be found by which Lebanon can ask for international help. Murr said that Lebanon has a problem of Hizballah moving around some 30,000 rockets and other weapons inside the country, but he denied that there was arms smuggling across the Syrian border. Logically, it doesn't make sense, he said; Hizballah has huge amounts of armaments already and needs no more. But more important, he said, the Israelis are surely monitoring "every inch" of the Syrian-Lebanese border, 24 hours a day. Do you believe, Murr asked, that, if the Israelis had solid information about weapons smuggling, they would refrain from taking any action? The Ambassador and NEA/ELA Director noted that was indeed what was happening, as Israel was allowing the Lebanese themselves the time and space to solve the problem. But patience is running out. With apparent sincerity, Murr denied that such smuggling from Syria was occurring. (We will discuss this further with Murr, warning

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him that he will be scornfully tossed out of Washington with such absurd claims.)

POSSIBLE FRENCH GIFT
OF MILITARY COMMO SET

¶ 9. (S) Murr also touched on his official visit to France, cut short by his need to return to Bteghrin to call on victims of the bus bombings. The French, he said, have promised the LAF a secure, rehabbed communications system as a grant. (While he estimated the value at USD 35 Euro, we are skeptical. Knowing of Murr's tendency to exaggerate and embellish, we will look into this and would appreciate any information Embassy Paris on this reported gift.)
FELTMAN